

USAID Consultation on the FY2016 RFA Refine and Implement Pilot in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) June 25, 2015

Facilitated by The TOPS Program, and featuring USAID Office of Food for Peace (FFP) senior staff:

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In these notes:

Opening Remarks: Dina Esposito	1
Presentation: Arif Rashid	2
Insight from Mercy Corps' Experience.....	3
Q&A on the Presentation and Questions Submitted to FFP to Date.....	3
Implementer Feedback on Gaps in the Presentation on the Refine and Implement Model and Recommendations for FFP	7
FFP Clarifications throughout the Consultation.....	8
Next Steps	9

Opening Remarks: Dina Esposito

This consultation is a follow-on to one held in August 2014 on how FFP solicits applications for development programming. The DRC pilot will be the first time FFP is rolling out the Refine and Implement process, which is still in development. The process aims to make the RFA and program design better reflect what we know happens on the ground during program inception and to respond to changing or unanticipated situations once the program begins to be implemented. Implementers will still need to submit a full application with a strong theory of change (TOC).

We know that programs are usually implemented by people who were not necessarily closely involved in proposal development. During the first year, implementers realize that things have changed, or they learn things that the proposal writers were not aware of, yet they feel constrained to implement only what was proposed. The first year will be an opportunity to refine the thinking, to really listen to the communities, and to determine and respond to their real needs. Overall, FFP wants to have a process that is more meaningful, more consultative, and delivers better results.

Presentation: Arif Rashid

Please see the posted PowerPoint presentation for more details on the new RFA and award implementation process, including new project timelines.

As Dina noted, applicants will still need to submit a full application that includes:

- A sound Theory of Change
- Innovative strategies
- Strong promise of achieving sustainable results
- Ambitious targets
- Significant knowledge about the target areas
- A built-in sustainability strategy

The PowerPoint presentation lists some assessments for year one. Not all those listed necessarily need to be carried out; which assessments are carried out will be determined by what the awardee proposed. Implementers should submit to FFP scopes of work for all assessments. The scopes of work need to describe the geographic area to be included in the project so external contractors conducting the baseline study can cover it. FFP selects the contractor for the baseline survey, the results of which will be shared with the awardee so the awardee can refine the TOC and determine final project activities. Activities implemented need to align with the vision community members have for their own lives.

The new award implementation process is mostly about re-envisioning the first year of the award, called the refinement year. This refinement stage should be a collaborative effort between the awardee, USAID, and the target community. The refinement stage should include the baseline study, formative research to identify barriers to behavior change and the gender analysis, among other assessment activities. Any information garnered from the baseline survey and the refinement year should be used to refine the TOC and determine/update project activities. The first year also should be used to establish and/or strengthen partnerships with relevant stakeholders in the target and subject area that can best contribute to project goals.

Instead of needing to demonstrate results in the first year, this process allows implementers to focus on confirming the situation on the ground and then refining the program (though implementers should have considerable knowledge of the situation on the ground through the application development process). At the end of year one, the Chief of Party will make a presentation on assessment results and final project activities (presentation content to be determined in partnership with FFP) most likely in Washington. FFP also will facilitate the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) workshop toward the end of year one to help implementers organize their M&E plans.

The main implementation takes place during years two to four. Towards the end of year four, the project will undergo an external evaluation with quantitative and qualitative components that will be compared with the baseline study. Based on the results of the year four evaluation, the project may be extended for three to five additional years or will close at the end of year five.

Insight from Mercy Corps' Experience

Mercy Corps implemented a water project in DRC under the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID). DFID funded an initial one-year activity during which MC conducted assessments and research to design a multi-year water project. Following the year-long research and assessment period, Mercy Corps held a large, five-day design workshop that included the donor and other experts to fully rework the project's TOC. This process was different from the norm, and DFID's role as donor was not one of "policing." The process was uncomfortable initially because it was such a different way of engaging from both sides (donor and awardee), but it improved the project design overall. Mercy Corps' inclination was to not spend too much money in the inception phase. MC learned that they still needed to have a strong management function and systems in place so that once all the assessment results came in, staff were in place to analyze results, start on making changes, and implement the program.

Q&A on the Presentation and Questions Submitted to FFP to Date

Implementer question: Will there be Bellmon Estimation Studies for Title II (BEST) analysis and desk review before the RFA is released? Will it contain broader geographic targeting used to refine the baseline?

FFP response: Yes, there will be a BEST analysis and everything else that typically goes along with an RFA.

Implementer question (paraphrased from a question submitted online prior to the consultation): Does this refinement year and these consultations in year one replace the robust field-level assessments typically conducted during the current application process?

FFP response: No, you will still need to submit the full application based on your own studies to make sure that the project is designed correctly, and then these Year 1 assessments are different, and not all are necessarily required. Based on the application preparation, some might be sequenced, some might be done in combination or feed off each other or complement each other. A lot of information will be in the country-specific information and in the RFA.

Implementer question: It's one thing to change the timeframes and the order in which things are done, I'm trying to get a handle on the level of partnership that seems to be described here. It seems to be a greater level of engagement between FFP and PVO staff in terms of framing etc., not simply an award has been made and then submitting reports, but that we're building this together?

FFP response: This will be a learning experience for FFP as well. We would like to collaborate with you in Year 1 so that together we can make best use of Year 1 to refine the project.

Implementer question: Apart from the two-phased approach (Refine and Implement), what else is different from last year (e.g., evaluation criteria, robustness of proposals)?

FFP response: The email TOPS sent about this consultation contained some of this information. There is now something in 2CFR200 called a Notification of Funding; new awards are being made under 2CFR200 and not 22CFR226. Reg 211 is what covers the food aid component. The format has changed slightly and you can see that if you look at the regulation. It's a full programmatic description of what you're proposing, eligibility information, application preparation and submission information, and application review information including criteria. The format has changed slightly, but a lot is the same. For example, this year gender cropped up in evaluation criteria, but for FY16 we're not sure but will revisit

before draft RFA goes out. The year 1 plan will be different from what you used to submit. The biggest difference is that in this case, during the first year implementers have an opportunity to work with FFP and people on the ground to see if proposed activities would work and make refinements. This is different than the proposal being written in DC and then just sent to people who implement on the ground without an opportunity for adjustments. Proposals become stronger, and yes, applicants are absolutely still proposing a 5-year project.

Implementer question: Could FFP lay out all the meetings and workshops awardees/projects will have to participate in, including when, where, and who with, so we can budget for these meetings including for travel and partner participation?

FFP response: The presentation by the COP at the end of Year 1 and M&E workshop are shown in the schematic in the PowerPoint presentation and all of it will be laid out in the country-specific information.

Implementer question: We understand that during the first year there will be an opportunity to correct errors that might have plagued projects in the past. Will there be bias control as well?

FFP response: USAID is being pushed toward independent baseline and final evaluations, so outside firms that specialize in these types of assessments will be hired. FFP will make sure that the independent contractor has the capacity to carry out these evaluations.

Implementer question: During the baseline study, is there a way to add in environmental and gender assessments so all studies can be carried out at one time?

FFP response: Typically baseline indicators include gender (there are eight gender indicators this year). But the baseline study will be contracted out before the full gender analysis is conducted, and the gender analysis is primarily qualitative. There will be some cross-over between the two, but completely tweaking baseline design to include the gender analysis is not feasible.

Implementer question: Can you talk a little about how this will affect partnerships and consortiums? If awardees do not pick partners until after year one, that could pose problems for program design.

FFP response: The vision is not that you will not propose partners as part of the application, if the awardee is part of a consortium, then it needs to be explained in the application. Key partners also should be described in the application. Awardees can add partners in year one after further examination of what is going on in the field and after investigating what other potential partners could be doing. Look for synergies and potential new partners so there is not too much programmatic overlap across implementers. Also look at what other donors are doing and how that may impact your proposed plans.

Implementer question: Remember that in most countries, starting implementation is tough if you are not registered. Would this prohibit having new partners in-country?

FFP response: It depends on the registration process in that specific country. We don't know what the structure is in DRC. If you are really worried about this, your organization needs to explore who is working where and who is allowed to work there and to design a project around these factors. This also applies to logistics and what other countries you might have to go through to get supplies. With the first year allowing for some refinement it may give you more time to attend to things like registration.

Implementer question: From the implementers' perspective, it is important to know when project implementation actually starts versus when the project design process ends. Implementers need to think about logistics and purchasing things like supplies, vehicles, and office space, and hiring staff.

Implementers would like to be clearer on the line between the design and implementation phases.

FFP response: Having a refinement period does not mean that year one cannot include implementation of some activities, at least those that don't require that the baseline survey is complete. A question came in about hiring staff, and, yes, the awardee absolutely can start hiring in year one, and in fact will need to do so. If the implementing organization knows a particular community really well, project activities can flow/start more quickly. There is no exact timeline stating that X has to be done in Y month, but implementers absolutely need baseline data to move forward with designing certain activities. The point is that we do not want to wait until the mid-term evaluation (MTE) to determine what sort of programming really is needed. FFP does not want implementers to feel that they have to make excuses about why targets were not reached by mid-term when these issues could have been worked out in the first year.

FFP response: Once the project is approved, activities in year 1 – the refinement year – should be budgeted for and included. Implementers really need to flesh out the details of their intended activities in the application. The application is not a concept paper that allows the awardee to flesh out project details after receiving the award. Awardees may not change the overarching technical area they are implementing in or the overall project activities in a major way after receiving the award. Remember that all major financial changes have to be approved, so implementers need to write their applications in such a way that the refinement period is not extremely involved or shocking. Also, we don't envision that the implementer will be hiring consultants to conduct all early activities and assessments, but staff should be conducting them so that they learn from them and get to know the communities and can apply those lessons during implementation.

Implementer question (came in online): About calls forward and timing?

FFP response: We know that the logistics in DRC will be complicated by difficult conditions on the ground, and you might have to have the call forward earlier than usual, and have commodities for distribution in place earlier. Also, if commodities need to transit through a third country those details need to be planned for carefully before the call forward. The implementation plan will need to take all that into account. Refinement means adjustments may need to be made for example in the food basket in the second year.

Implementer question: What level of staff/types of positions can be hired in year one, considering that year one consists mainly of conducting studies and refining the project design? We are glad to hear that we can start some activities, but are we to treat this new model as if it is a standard project like we have been carrying out until now, just with an extra layer of assessments and FFP engagement?

FFP response: When an organization designs a 5-year award, it includes a refinement period. Implementers should know their target communities before writing applications, so FFP is banking on implementers knowing which communities and areas they want to target so some implementation, such as training, can start up fairly quickly. How many staff the awardee hires will depend on how the awardee envisions the activities for year one and on the community consultations that will happen. Awardees can start hiring staff in year one, but might need to refine the staffing plan in year two. Remember that FFP does not expect full implementation before year two, and there is no expectation of huge results in year two. FFP wants to make sure that proposed achievements and milestones submitted in the application can be achieved through project activities. The purpose of the new process is not to tell implementers how to implement the project, but FFP sees projects run into trouble because they were too ambitious in the beginning or realized a little into the project that activities or staff requirements were not feasible; FFP wants to avoid this and to give the implementers more flexibility to

adjust during year one. Year one is meant to be a time of partnership, not policing. If the end of year one presentation shows that the project is vastly different than what originally was proposed, this will be less stressful and surprising to FFP because FFP, having collaborated with the awardee, will already be aware of the need for certain revisions. FFP wants to be able to set up implementers so that by the time the year four evaluation is conducted, the project has a greater opportunity of getting extended.

Implementer question: It seems like there will be a gap in implementation during the refinement year, given that implementation does not commence until six months in. How can we address these gaps?

FFP response: The answer really depends on project design. Remember that there is flexibility with when to start implementation. Project implementation can start before the end of year one; awardees just need to justify why they want to start certain activities when they want to start them.

Implementer question: Also about gaps in programming, what if the application is submitted for a follow-on award?

FFP response: That is a different issue. The country backstop officer (CBO) will help determine the risk of gaps in programming and what to do. But, remember that FFP does not award follow-on projects.

Implementer question: It would be helpful to know timelines for FFP feedback so projects can tweak implementation timelines.

FFP response: FFP will provide comments on scopes of work within 3 weeks. The agreement officer's representative (AOR) is supposed to review and approve reports before they are submitted to the Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC), but this does not affect implementation. FFP will ask Erika Clesceri (DCHA Bureau Environmental Officer) about the timeline of reviewing a submitted Initial Environmental Examination (IEE).

Implementer question: What about partnership plans?

FFP response: Partnership plans should be included as part of the application submission, and may be refined during the first year. Some organizations design the proposal as part of a consortium, and during year one the partnership plan may evolve. It could be that the way it is described in the PowerPoint presentation is confusing, and FFP will revise this language to be less confusing.

Implementer question: Could you explain the refinement process after year one and how it affects the TOC?

FFP Response: Over the course of year one and the life of the project, implementers will learn information about what and how to implement that will influence the TOC. Therefore, implementers will need to revisit and potentially update their TOC at least annually to reflect an enhanced understanding of the implementation environment. The TOC is submitted with the application, and the refined TOC is shared with FFP by the COP at the end of year one presentation.

Implementer question: Will awards continue to be cooperative agreements?

FFP Response: Yes

Implementer question: Using the example of aligning with crop seasons, if the project gets to the end of its first (refinement) year and missed the opportunity to begin cultivating that crop, how will the project be able to demonstrate results?

FFP Response: Your implementation plan should be put together in such a way that you do not miss a crop year.

Implementer Feedback on Gaps in the Presentation on the Refine and Implement Model and Recommendations for FFP

- Please clarify how the Notice of Funding (NOF) is revised, specifically the timing and process for revising the language. It is recommended that the sooner the information on that process is shared, the lower implementers' stress levels will be. (FFP has not received directives on this yet, but based on components of the RFA, the NOF will be similar.)
- Multiple comments on the issue of properly timing the RFAs and awards:
 - The new timeline will be especially helpful to give organizations time to recruit technical staff and get their input to program design.
 - Timing refining the design of the project to align with value chains should be considered.
 - Take into account timing the RFA to the context and location of the project so that issuing the award and start of implementation are properly timed.
- We request clarity on how this process will impact the issues letter stage, and specifically, what the issues stage will focus on. (FFP says that activities being proposed need to be consistent with the TOC and supported by analysis, so likely issues letters would direct implementers to areas where more analysis might be needed.)
- As a community, we need to put more effort into examining knowledge coming out of past projects and building on it.
- Clarify for new partners and new organizations that might want to support project implementation what benefits the new award process and timeline will have.
- The community needs to acknowledge the time burden on technical staff from both the donor and implementer if there is a year-long collaboration. The initial refinement year will require an adjustment in the way people work.
- Please provide clarity on when FFP is being collaborative (i.e., providing suggestions) and when FFP is providing oversight (i.e., providing requirements) because there are times when organizations need to be compliant and times when there is more leeway for organizations to decide for themselves; FFP just needs to be clear which is which.
- Please clarify how geographic targeting of communities in year one take into account fluctuation during conflict.
- Like in the Mercy Corps example, would there be a design workshop at the end of year one? Is such a workshop something that could be added to proposals or perhaps be a requirement? What is FFP's role in any project redesign during the implementation year?
- Please provide greater clarity on what end-of-year-one reporting will look like and how that might change under the new model.

- Define the evaluation that happens in year four. Is it a final evaluation or an MTE? (FFP says it is the end of year four evaluation.)
- Now that the qualitative MTE is gone, will what is gained from an MTE be transferred into the new structure? Remember that even rigorous refinement doesn't take into account everything that can happen on the ground during implementation. (FFP says the process is shifting toward implementers refining their programs as needed rather than conducting larger overhauls after receiving MTE results.)
- Implementers would like transparency on the criteria for determining if the project will receive an extension, the potential length of that extension, how FFP comes to a decision, whether the decision is in any way collaborative in nature, and when implementers are notified if the project will continue or end.

FFP Clarifications throughout the Consultation

- Implementers should be up front about which issues or programming points need more research and analysis. The organization writing the proposal should have already done some analysis, so be up front about what more needs to be done. The application will propose new areas for assessment to FFP; FFP will not be dictating to the awardee what areas need more assessment.
- The issues letter will explain if more analysis is needed or if there was not enough information on assessment and analysis in the proposal.
- Don't lose, e.g., the agriculture season because you need to do more research. There is no direction from FFP not to implement in year one. FFP is just saying that instead of pretending that changes don't happen, the process to account for potential changes is built into the award time frame.
- The refinement period includes the idea of substantial involvement, now described as a "shared contribution to improve project design for lasting impact." FFP suggests more verbal engagement between FFP and implementers as way to be more efficient (rather than back and forth over email).
- Implementers should design the end of year one presentation to include any shifts in programming. The presentation is the culmination of the refinement year (year one).
- Project gains stemming from the refinement year are seen in the middle of the project rather than at the outset.
- FFP does not specify exact dollar amounts to be spent in specific project years. If resource flow needs to be uneven, FFP will support that. Do not build in artificial funds into budgets because you think FFP wants you to spend so much money in a given year.
- The technical team under the Policy and Technical Division is expanding. FFP is very interested in reworking evaluation criteria and hopes the technical team will work on this.
- FFP is partnering with the USAID Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (CMM) and the CMM-funded Fragility and Conflict Technical Research Services (FACTRS) project to ensure that the RFA process and other aspects of FFP work include greater sensitivity on conflict. FFP is very

cognizant of fact that environments in which we work are fragile or conflict-affected in some way and that the field as a whole needs to improve how our work reflects these environments. More information on this will be included in RFA.

Next Steps

Please send any additional suggestions and/or questions to Juli Majernik at jmajernik@usaid.gov or to The TOPS Program at info@thetopsprogram.org.

The FFP team (including the senior staff in attendance) will decide on the next steps in the process.

FFP will try to address the questions posed in this consultation and additional questions received as much as possible.

FFP hopes to have another meeting after the draft RFA comes out and before it is finalized. This way implementers can give feedback before the guidance is finalized.